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## Art, Futurism, Technology: An Interview With Primo Conti

Primo Conti (1900–1988) was an Italian painter and writer who was part of the Futurist movement in the second decade of this century. He started to paint and to write at an early age and when he was only 13, he became actively involved with the Futurist movement. I visited Primo Conti in 1987 at his house in Fiesole. A charming and energetic 87-year-old man, dressed casually in jeans, Primo Conti and Munda, his wife of many years, lived in an interior that would have made proud not only the Futurists, but any designer of the eighties. From updated TVs and VCRs to the latest glass furniture and fiber-glass lamps, from the bright white walls to the high-tech accessories, the house seemed to pay homage not to the first decades of this century, but rather to its last. Memorabilia was also part of the decor. Yet, one could not find the nostalgic sentimentality of an artist who lives solely from memories. Primo Conti was, in 1987, very active, full of energy and he assiduously continued to paint. While he had many projects for the future, I was particularly interested to ask him about his early years and his participation in the Futurist movement.

I had a long conversation with him and what follows are excerpts from that discussion. I returned the next summer, but Primo Conti's health prevented him from continuing our discussion. He died later that fall. This is probably Primo Conti's last interview.

(This an edited and translated text of the taped interview.)

IRINA COSTACHE: I would like to ask to share some of your memoirs about your first meeting with the Futurists.

PRIMO CONTI: Let me begin by simply saying that I feel I was very fortunate throughout my entire life. Life was very generous to me, and even though symbolically I paid for its generosity—I have been sick since my youth, I had many personal problems—, I still feel that life was indeed more than generous to me. One of the reasons for my feeling so fortunate is the fact that I was able to start to paint and draw at the age of 10, and at 13 I was already showing my work in galleries. It is precisely during that year, 1913, the year of my artistic debut, that I met the Futurists. In 1913, the first major Futurist exhibition was held in Florence. Although I was then at the beginning of both my life and my artistic career, I was fully involved in the arts. I literally ran to see the Futurist exhibition, and there I could not help but notice the visitors openly laughing at the paintings in the show and facetiously suggesting that the paintings were done by “crazy artists.” I, on the contrary, became instantly enthusiastic and I immediately found the paintings interesting, beautiful . . . The Futurists saw this uninhibited enthusiasm of a 13-year-old boy and wanted to find out what I had to say about their work. How is it possible, they asked me, that you, still only a boy, can understand our work, when most people seem to reject it. I told them, that I am an artist, that I paint, and that I have my own studio. The Futurists were very impressed. One of them, Papini, gave me this photograph and he wrote on it, “To the youngest and the smartest visitor of the Futurist Exhibition, Florence, 1913.”

IRINA COSTACHE: This was your first contact with Futurism.

PRIMO CONTI: It meant to me more, much more than simply an encounter. It was the first great artistic adventure of my life . . . In 1917 Picasso came to Florence with *Les Ballets Russes*. One morning as he was walking in Florence with Alberto Magnelli, Picasso saw one of my paintings. Picasso asked Magnelli who the artist was . . . That evening I was Picasso's guest at *Les Ballets Russes*. Later, in 1919, at a major Futurist exhibition in Milan, a small section of the show was dedicated to my paintings. Along with painting I also pursued my literary career, and by 1919, I was also known as a writer.

IRINA COSTACHE: What does Futurism represent for you?

PRIMO CONTI: For me Futurism is not solely a name given to an art movement. For me Futurism is rather an attitude, a way of life. I am saying this because I feel that to be a Futurist one does not have to paint or to write in a Futurist style or fashion. I think that for an artist, a true artist, who had seen and understood the Futurist experience, art is not the capability to produce beautiful paintings, but rather it is a continuous quest through which one acknowledges to the spirit the necessity to understand and to explore the unknown. Any new experience must be a conquest initiated by this inner, intuitive need to discover beneath the apparent surface, the profound mystery in which we all live . . . in which we all exist . . .

IRINA COSTACHE: You left the Futurist movement at an early stage. What triggered your leave?

PRIMO CONTI: I became interested in new directions, in particular in the Scuola Metafisica, and the work of De Chirico and Carrà. Their art was not concerned with the representation of modern life, but rather with relationships that seemed to exist beyond Time. These artists substituted the human figure with the mannequin, the puppet. The mannequin was in a sense for them the incarnation of something of a divine nature, something that had an existence beyond life itself, and yet with strong references to life . . .

IRINA COSTACHE: What did technology mean for you and the Futurists?

PRIMO CONTI: For me and for all other Futurist artists, the machine was extremely important. Technology was a way for us of opposing a certain kind of art, an art that one could call sentimental, soothing . . . Technology was something . . . strong. The machine was also responsible for creating a new individual, and for opening new means of expression to art. It also brought art and science closer together. This was partially accomplished earlier by the Divisionist artists . . . The Futurists wanted to bring in their paintings, in art, the possibility to express and represent movement. At the time of Futurism, science and art had many significant moments of fusion. This was possible, indeed,

because a scientific sensibility is a fairly recent element . . . science itself is ancient . . . but a science conscious of its own significance and cultural implication is very recent . . .

IRINA COSTACHE: What was the impact the technological discoveries had on Futurism?

PRIMO CONTI: The Futurists were very enthusiastic and open to all the technological changes . . . Marinetti, in particular, liked the precision of the machine. Art for Marinetti had to be similar to a mathematical theorem. I would say that the spirit of such an art, which remained lucid and logical for a good part of this century, is a gift given by Futurism to the 20th century art.

IRINA COSTACHE: What do you think about the relationship man/technology?

PRIMO CONTI: I think that the originator, the creator who gave birth to technology is the individual, the human being. Technology is her/his child . . . The inventor, the creator will always be present inside the machine . . .

IRINA COSTACHE: Some final thoughts . . .

PRIMO CONTI: . . . I feel that a courageous exploration of the mind, even if it ends in failure is more valuable than a renunciation . . . To win without a battle was, and still is, of no interest to me. It is better to lose. I am like an open window . . . I grab whatever comes to me: often flowers come through the window, other times a lightning strikes, and if I am able to avoid it, that is fine, but even if I cannot escape from it I still won't shut my window.

Fiesole, August, 1987

*(Editing and translation by Irina Costache)*

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